

Digital interiors

The Internet Housing Policies

Meet the Age of Confinement

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Abstract / Resumen / Résumé / Riassunto

One of the main characteristics of today's private and intimate environments is that they are completely pervaded by mass media, and more specifically by the spider's web of the Internet. Through the Internet, we incessantly generate mappable traces of our opinions, desires, will, preferences, values, interests, fears, mindsets and moods, concerns, etc. If we take a quick look at our relationship with mass media screens and interfaces throughout the 20th century up to the present day, we can easily appreciate how the trend has been a sustained and progressive reduction in both physical and symbolic distance and an increasing sophistication in the forms of control through mass media technology as they have steadily penetrated the private and intimate spaces of the individual. This article analyzes some of the consequences of the increasing loss of symbolic and physical distance with mass media and informational technologies. The confinement caused by COVID-19 has led to an unprecedented restriction of public freedoms in countries with a long democratic tradition, combined with the generalization of legitimate and imperious digital surveillance undertaken in the name of the «public interest» especially through smartphones. It is the perfect example of an encapsulated and strictly media- controlled privacy accompanied by a massive, extensive and frenetic use of the Internet as the only window «open to the outside world» and the only means of contact as vicarious as it is frustrating with the other. The COVID-19 crisis has permitted the foreshadowing of the true dimension of the Internet in terms of control and social engineering, following decades of adaptation, interiorization and massive adoption of the medium by the citizenry. In this perfect storm in which two viral natures collided (that of the internet and that of COVID-19), the structural links between the Internet and socio-political isolation have become clear.

Una de las principales características de los entornos privados e íntimos de hoy en día es que están completamente impregnados por los medios de comunicación, y más concretamente por la telaraña de Internet. A través de Internet, generamos, incesantemente, rastros mapeables de nuestras opiniones, deseos, voluntad, preferencias, valores, intereses, temores, mentalidades y estados de ánimo, preocupaciones, etc. Si examinamos rápidamente nuestra relación con las pantallas e interfaces de los medios de comunicación de masas a lo largo del siglo XX hasta la actualidad, podemos apreciar fácilmente cómo la tendencia ha sido una reducción sostenida y progresiva de la distancia física y simbólica y una creciente sofisticación de las formas de control a través de la tecnología de los medios de comunicación de masas a medida que han ido penetrando en los espacios privados e íntimos del individuo. Este artículo analiza algunas de las consecuencias de la creciente pérdida de distancia simbólica y física con los medios de comunicación y las tecnologías de la información. El confinamiento causado por el COVID-19 ha conducido a una restricción sin precedentes de las libertades públicas en países con una larga tradición democrática, combinada con la generalización de la vigilancia digital legítima e imperiosa emprendida en nombre del «interés público» especialmente a través de los *smartphones*. Es el ejemplo perfecto de una privacidad encapsulada y estrictamente controlada por los medios de comunicación, acompañada de un uso masivo, extenso y frenético de Internet como única ventana «abierta al mundo exterior» y único medio de contacto tan vicario como frustrante con el otro. La crisis del COVID-19 ha permitido presagiar la verdadera dimensión de Internet en términos de control e ingeniería social, tras décadas de adaptación, interiorización y adopción masiva del medio por parte de la ciudadanía. En esta tormenta perfecta en la que han chocado dos naturalezas virales (la de Internet y la del COVID-19), se han puesto de manifiesto los vínculos estructurales entre Internet y el aislamiento sociopolítico.

L'une des principales caractéristiques des environnements privés et intimes d'aujourd'hui est qu'ils sont complètement envahis par les médias, et plus particulièrement par la toile d'araignée de l'Internet. Avec l'Internet, nous générons sans cesse des traces cartographiables de nos opinions, désirs, volonté, préférences, valeurs, intérêts, craintes, mentalités et humeurs, préoc-

cupations, etc. Si nous examinons rapidement notre relation avec les écrans et les interfaces des médias de masse tout au long du XXe siècle jusqu'à nos jours, nous pouvons facilement apprécier la tendance à une réduction soutenue et progressive de la distance tant physique que symbolique et à une sophistication croissante des formes de contrôle par la technologie des médias de masse, à mesure qu'elles pénètrent dans l'espace privé et intime de l'individu. Cet article analyse quelques conséquences de la perte croissante de la distance symbolique et physique avec les médias de masse et les technologies de l'information. L'enfermement provoqué par le COVID-19 a conduit à une restriction sans précédent des libertés publiques dans des pays ayant une longue tradition démocratique, combinée avec la généralisation d'une surveillance numérique légitime et impérieuse entreprise au nom de «l'intérêt public», notamment par le biais des smartphones. C'est l'exemple parfait d'une vie privée encapsulée et strictement contrôlée par les médias, accompagnée d'une utilisation massive, extensive et frénétique de l'Internet comme seule fenêtre «ouverte sur le monde extérieur» et seul moyen de contact aussi virtuel que frustrant avec l'autre. La crise provoquée par le COVID-19 a permis de préfigurer la véritable dimension de l'Internet en termes de contrôle et d'ingénierie sociale, après des décennies d'adaptation, d'intériorisation et d'adoption massive du média par les citoyens. Dans cette tempête parfaite où deux natures virales se sont rencontrées (celle d'Internet et celle du COVID-19), les liens structurels entre Internet et l'isolement sociopolitique sont devenus évidents.

Una delle caratteristiche principali degli ambienti privati e intimi di oggi è che sono completamente pervasi dai mass media, e più precisamente dalla ragnatela di Internet. Attraverso Internet, generiamo incessantemente tracce mappabili delle nostre opinioni, dei nostri desideri, della nostra volontà, delle nostre preferenze, dei nostri valori, dei nostri interessi, delle nostre paure, delle nostre mentalità e dei nostri stati d'animo, delle nostre preoccupazioni, ecc. Se diamo un rapido sguardo al nostro rapporto con gli schermi e le interfacce dei mass media per tutto il XX secolo fino ai nostri giorni, possiamo facilmente apprezzare come la tendenza sia stata una costante e progressiva riduzione della distanza tanto fisica come simbolica e una crescente sofisticazione delle forme di controllo attraverso la tecnologia dei mass media che hanno costantemente penetrato gli spazi privati e intimi dell'individuo. Questo articolo analizza alcune delle conseguenze della crescente perdita di distanza simbolica e fisica dai mass media e dalle tecnologie informatiche. Il confinamento causato dal COVID-19 ha portato a una restrizione senza precedenti delle libertà pubbliche in paesi con una lunga tradizione democratica, combinata con la generalizzazione della sorveglianza digitale legittima e imperiosa intrapresa in nome dell'«interesse pubblico» soprattutto attraverso gli smartphone. È l'esempio perfetto di una privacy incapsulata e strettamente mediatica, accompagnata da un uso massiccio, esteso e frenetico di Internet come unica finestra «aperta al mondo esterno» e unico mezzo di contatto, insieme indiretto e frustrante, con l'altro. La crisi del COVID-19 ha permesso di prefigurare la vera dimensione di Internet in termini di controllo e di ingegneria sociale, dopo decenni di adattamento, interiorizzazione e adozione massiccia del mezzo da parte della cittadinanza. In questa tempesta perfetta in cui si sono scontrate due nature virali (quella di Internet e quella del COVID-19), i legami strutturali tra Internet e l'isolamento socio-politico sono diventati ormai evidenti.

Key words / Palabras clave / Mots-clé / Parole chiave

Internet, intimacy, mass media, politics, control, privacy, virality, COVID-19.
Internet, intimidad, mass media, política, control, privacidad, viralidad,
COVID-19.

Internet, intimité, massmédia, politique, contrôle, privacité, viralité, COVID-19.
Internet, intimità, mass media, politica, controllo, privacità, viralità, COVID-19.

Even if it communicates nothing, discourse represents the existence of communication; even if it denies the obvious, it affirms that speech constitutes truth; even if it is intended to deceive, it speculates on faith in testimony.

JACQUES LACAN

The distance with the mass media interface has been drastically reduced in the digital media system. This becomes clear if we trace a timeline from the unreachable cinema screen, situated at a considerable distance, both in the collective imaginary and with respect to the viewer's body, passing through the intermediate position occupied by the TV screen, which, despite having entered the private and domestic space, continued to prescribe a physical distance of consumption which was accompanied by a socialization of the gaze (the context of a familiar or group consumption¹), to the native Internet screen which, especially in the case of mobile devices and similar gadgets, is practically stuck to our body and which we see as a daily extension of ourselves. But it's not just about the distance or size of the screen, it's about the whole institutionalized mode of reception of the Internet medium, regardless of the size or nature of the screen. It doesn't matter if we talk about a Netflix series that is consumed through a computer screen or through a big TV screen. The interiorized and socialized discourse about the Internet as a medium that enables free choice and the empowerment of users, as opposed to the precedent «unidirectional» and «dictatorial» media, has had an effect on audiences

¹ Watching television without company has been associated symbolically and in terms of representation with loneliness (the rupture of the social bond, to a greater or lesser extent); consuming the Internet unaccompanied no longer entails this type of connotation, since it is considered the *natural* way to consume the medium.

and has generated a predisposition towards the Internet medium mostly unaware of power relations, the lack of equipollence and the biased and strategic nature of the medium in favor of ideological assimilation of a simulacrum of closeness, non-intentionality, horizontality, everydayness, free choice and control on the part of the average user. The normalized reception modes through which we consume a series programmed on a television channel and a series through Netflix, to give an example, are very different and determine the meaning and effects that this media discourse provokes. The feeling of free choice and control over the contents of these platforms, even though it is a mere phantasmagoria (actually users do not decide anything or control anything that is really relevant or strategic), determines a much more casual reception and a more naïve approach to media discourses shored up by a feeling of closeness to the medium that only contributes to its doctrinal effects being much more powerful. This, shall we say, «lowering of defenses» that has been induced for decades through the dominant and normalized discourse on the Internet has paved the way for a depoliticized reception whose main consequence is that the political effects of the medium are, actually, much more powerful, as is its potential to influence the values, beliefs, actions and, in general, the expectational horizon of individuals. As Gilles Deleuze (5) pointed out, «types of machines are easily matched with each type of society—not that machines are determining, but because they express those social forms capable of generating them and using them». Those environments, in the context of what Deleuze called «societies of control» accomplish the main functions of organizing production and administering life.

One of the effects of the digital logic is that, under an apparently almost infinite diversity and variety of media discourses, a cultural and discursive homogenization is taking place, a strict formatting of the narratives that account for the given and the possible, for the «natural» relations between human beings and for the meaning of individuality. The Internet has probably allowed creation of the largest discursive and representational

oligopoly in history. Once again, it is not the manifest content or the apparent variety of contents that we need to focus on, but rather it is on the structure or, better still, on the shaping of these discursive elements, in order to notice the prevailing sensation of déjà vu. The analysis of the Internet from the discursive point of view should be approached eminently not in terms of its manifest contents, but from the perspective of its institutionalized mode of reception that formats and standardizes all possible contents. It must be taken into account that as decisive as the modes of representation are, they are the modes of reception that the discourse triggers. A good part of the political effects of a given narrative derive from these latter.

As stated in a recent study (Carrera), the annulment of the spectacular distance (the cancellation of the physical and symbolic distance with the medium) at the reception level and its implications, has far-reaching socio-political consequences, resulting in what the mentioned study describes as a «society without spectacle». Spectacle, as we use the term here, means, essentially, a mode of reception marked by a symbolic distance with the medium and its representational interface (the *screen*, conceived in broad terms as the representational *shield* of a specific socio-economic system) and, therefore, with the contents displayed. That means that spectacle is essentially generated at the level of reception, not at the level of the manifest content of representation. The same film consumed through a cinema screen and through a mobile or computer screen will lead to a spectacular reception mode (in the first case) or not (in the second), regardless of whether it is the same film with the same contents and the same images. It is evident that the reception mode and the normalized experience associated with it determines to a great extent the meaning and the way we relate to representation. Since it (the socialized reception mode) incorporates content of a metatextual order, no textual analysis that attempts to determine the effects that a discourse may have on the audience that consumes it, should omit the prevalent (institutionalized) mode of reception of a specific medium. It is in that sense that we can affirm,

following McLuhan, that the medium is (also) the message, since it establishes the relational framework (the political dimension of this should not go unnoticed) with representation. The political dimension of representation (including artistic representation) as we understand it, is closely linked to the modes of reception, not just to the modes of representation considered as an affair that essentially concerns the instances of the «author» or the «emitter»², and the explicit content and the pronouncements contained in a specific discourse. It is not only a question of statements and specific images displayed, for instance, in a film or a novel, it is a question of the system of reception that underlies the inner structure of a discourse (the patterns that govern the interwovenness of form and manifest content) and the institutionalized bond with the medium through which a specific representation is displayed.

There are multiple levels, then, in the construction of the political dimension of a representation, and they include both the modes of reception that the discourse conveys (each text describes and prescribes a model receptor, in the same way that we prefigure a model receptor when we write different emails to different persons while dealing with the same matter) and those that are determined by the medium itself through the institutionalized and interiorized discourse about it. Let's see an example of the latter: The rhetoric of cinema, the rhetoric of TV and the rhetoric of Internet are very different as far as the spectator / user / citizen is concerned. We can easily recognize the myth of Big Brother and the alienated masses, the hierarchical structure of communication in the case of TV and the myth of the empowered user, horizontality and the user-friendly medium in the case of the Internet. Since it is obvious that there is no substantial difference between TV and the Internet as mass media in terms of systems of power at the service of economic and political interests, the apparent horizontality and conviviality of Internet

can thus only be conceived as a simulacrum, that, precisely, serves to keep the business (the system) running in optimal conditions. The Internet user is no more in control of the medium than the television masses were. But, and this is the important thing here, individuals *feel different* as receivers (they have been intensively coached to feel different). It has been instilled in them with crushing insistence that the experience of Internet consumption is associated with free choice, user empowerment, etc., to the point of establishing a mode of reception in which structural suspicion³ and alertness towards the environment the Internet creates has been replaced by small precautions against its fraudulent and marginal use.

What is important is that behind the empowerment and overexposure of a domestic, private scenography, behind the exaltation of a strictly private relationship with the Internet medium, what is being systematically veiled and concealed is the intrinsic political nature of all media, that is, their function as naturalizers and preservers of the dominant power relations at a given historical moment. There is no greater contradiction in terms than calling a medium «revolutionary» in the sense that it would destabilize existing power structures, as has been the case with the mainstream discourse on the Internet that simulated a fallacious situation of a medium beyond control, since millions of users could directly express their views through it. The production of consent in the case of Internet passes through the simulation of a free and deregulated environment, the most recent metamorphosis of the fiction of the «free market» integrated by «free individuals» performing in an abstract and depoliticized background of equal opportunities.

Pierre Klossowski wrote in 1969, in a book about Nietzsche, «there is no longer a “bourgeois” society, but something much more complex that has replaced it: an industrialist organization that, conserving the appearances of the bourgeois building, regroups and multiplies the social classes according to the growth or the

² Both are textual instances, not «individuals». The same happens with the receiver (user, spectator, etc.) that is also a textual instance constructed through discourse and intended as a textual environment which prescribes how the individuals exposed to a form of representation relate to that form.

³ Echoing the expression of Paul Ricoeur, «hermeneutics of suspicion», that he used to refer to the work of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud.

decrease of increasingly diversified needs» (Klossowski, 25). The Internet, as a medium, is a clear exponent of this society. It cannot, therefore, be confronted critically through the categories, which applied to a classical bourgeois society, are in fact the ones that have been mostly used to «critically» theorize about mass media, including the Internet. This «industrialist organization» that Klossowski considered has replaced the bourgeois society, implies in Gilles Deleuze's words, «new ways of handling money, profits, and humans that no longer pass through the old factory form». According to Deleuze, these were «societies of control», organized around the logic of the corporation.

The Internet imaginary has deployed a symbolic space of privacy and intimacy, staging some sort of return to the womb which makes it easier to make off with the political and economic dimensions of every medium and that ties in perfectly with the current capitalist logic and its inherent all-private (therefore, helpless) subjectivities. This focalization on privacy, private space and private individuals is eminently ideological, but what is important, since it has effects that largely transcend this closed and meticulously isolated private realm of the Internet, is that to relate to the medium from this imaginary space, established from above and that formats the user's experience, determines the modes of reception of the representations that circulate through it. We should never forget that privacy is a political construction, not its opposite. As Freud (1920) explained, «in the psychic life of the individual, "the Other" is regularly present as a model, as an object, as a helper and as an enemy, and in this way individual psychology is at the same time in a broad, but completely legitimate sense, social psychology».

The fallacious discourse about a free market and the fiction of a universal free individual performing in an abstract regime of free competition bolsters the mainstream discourse of the Internet, a rhetoric that stages decontextualized «global» individuals, supposedly free and empowered users acting in the deregulated and wild space of the Internet. It is therefore the same rhetoric underlying the defense of unrestrained capi-

talism (actually less «wild» than it might seem, guarded and protected as it is by the power of the state that, if necessary, comes to its rescue) and at the service of the same cause. Internet discursive spaces are in fact strictly regulated by the logic of power (the law of the strongest) and economics (profitability). It is this logic and not that of a publicized universal «free concurrence» that governs the medium. When we speak of institutionalized discourse, we must take into account Foucault's statement: «Discourse is not simply that which translates (reflects) the struggles or systems of domination, but that for which, and by means of which, one fights, that power which one wants to possess» (Foucault, 12).

We must conclude then that the fiction of the empowered creative user is essentially a political discursive device (politics, as we understood it, incorporates the socio-economic and cultural fields). This is not without consequences. We will attempt to outline some of them in the pages that follow.

The Internet as a medium creates an environment that «formats» all contents accessible through it, and inserts them into its own logic. This formatting prevents content channeled through the Internet from being displayed according to a logic that would allow it to intervene or act upon the media or extra-media context. The Internet is a highly structured language (or, to be more specific, a metalanguage, a programming language), not just an aseptic channel. As Richard Serra (200) pointed out, «every language has a structure about which nothing critical can be said in that language. There has to be another language, which deals with the structure of the first one but has a different structure to criticize it». It is evident that this critical language cannot be deployed within its own environment (the Internet environment).

The foregoing are some characteristics of the space, of the «digital urbanism» that the Internet creates for its users to inhabit; a kind of mass media driven architecture that operates in the representational and symbolic realms of public communication and popular culture and from there deploys profound political and econom-

ic effects. The determination of these symbolic spaces and the proto-individualities designed to inhabit them is not of the order of the ontological and the ineluctable, as intended by some. It requires the *free* acceptance by citizens of these premises. We should never forget that mass media are systemic branches, not isolated devices of «mere» entertainment and even less so are they instruments of emancipation as we have heard many times concerning the Internet. This pro-systemic model inhabitant and its spaces are, therefore, representations generated in the realm of power, the same that creates the laws according to which «popular culture» is produced and reproduced. What we will attempt to define below is the Internet «urbanism» and the prototype of interior and privacy it implies (that is, the type of individuality it proposes).

One of the most remarkable (and misleading) things about the Internet is the ontologization and generalization of the logic of a very concrete mass media and the extrapolation of this logic to the society as a whole. Suddenly, The Network and its structure have become, according to the dominant discourse, as if by magic, a mirror of the structure of 21st century society, amidst proclamations that could be described as naive if they were not openly functional, systemic and, most of the time, demagogic. Utterances, which are probably, on many occasions, formulated without an explicit deceptive intention, such as «organicists models in which each member obediently serves the whole were clearly out»; «assemblages are not governed by any central head»⁴ —(Bennet, 84)— or, alluding to the entropy of the network, «a grid of discrete locations all of which from the point of view of the system have an equal probability of being accessed» (Terranova, 90) end up promoting and backing up the deceptive assertion that Internet has ended the «old» hierarchy, power, inequalities... It is very misleading to identify the architecture of the Internet with the architecture of society as a whole, and to transpose a technopolitical rhetoric of decentralization, interactivity, potential entropy,

⁴ On the contrary, the force of the state and of the systemic constraints on the individual are no less present in the age of Internet, it goes without saying.

etc. into the social realm as if a specific technology would transform the logic of the Leviathan into a happy meadow of unrestrained subjective freedom. This idealistic and deceptive fable of abstract empowered users defined only in their private relationship with a pervading and powerful mass media, expressly ignores the power structures and constraints that determine the civitas (class, power, money, economic constrictions, etc.) and the means of communication through which the production and reproduction of (discursive) power are consummated.

The architecture of the Internet is said to produce, immediately and in a replicative way, «new modes of networked sociality» (Rossiter, 96). We have heard that idea in multiple variants with the same conservative and dogmatic background. So, this ideological discourse centered on a specific «mass media architecture» overlaps and hides the political-economic architecture of a society that is based on inequality, class segregation and power relationships (as are the majority of societies known till now, by the way). The «political correctness» at work here is by no means innocuous. Media communication, information architecture, are derivatives, stabilizers and preservatives of a system, not founding or constituent principles of a specific social system or a «new order».

As a general rule, the logic of the mass media, including the Internet, is the logic of power, not of «emancipation» or subversion. The Internet is, as happens with all media, conservative by definition. The functional systemic character of the mediated communication was clearly stated from the beginning of the theorization about media and popular culture. It is true that in the pre-Internet media architecture, which has been defined *against* the «new digital order» as centralized, unidirectional, non-interactive, hierarchical ..., the existence of enunciative hierarchies and the evidence of power structures were more evident. The Internet, with its architecture of informational flows, apparently decentralized and horizontal, hides the centralized and hierarchical order behind it much more effectively, presenting itself through an apparently deregulated, plural

and libertarian scenography. This global and formatted point of view, in order to be effective, has to pretend that it itself is not a point of view, taking up Bourdieu's words, but only an «aseptic channel» that generously and disinterestedly «gives (public) voice» to everyone. This «new order» is essentially the old one in new clothes decorated with claims about freedom, empowerment, creativity, etc.

One of its ad-concepts appeals to the phantasmagoria of a rhizomatic and fragmented space. The overexploitation of Deleuze's concepts (among which is that of «rhizome») in order to legitimize a mass media-based conservative discourse disguising itself as progressive should be considered a sign of the times. A similar thing happens with Walter Benjamin, among other so-called «radical» authors. The appropriation of their assumed «radical» discourse through quotations whose interpretational horizon is highly institutionalized are in the line of the domestication of theory that we can see all around us. Just to give two examples of conceptual domestication: the rhizomatic and anti-institutionalized space of Deleuze is identified and assimilated into a controlled Internet network that strictly follows the logic of capital, and the anti-dogmatic use of the fragmentary form in Benjamin is identified with the simulacra of fragmentation and a supposed decentralized and plural cyberspace in which fragments are not in fact discursive destabilizing forces but are at the service of a few institutional discourses and meta-discourses to which they belong and which they prop up through users' viralization. The hyper textual logic of the mass media Internet is, both in conceptual and socio-political terms, only a phantasmagoria of a linear and compulsory logic, since the discourses that are fragmented are inserted into a logic which is not that of emancipation but of control, and since, as we have said, there is no possibility of a «radical» mass media. A progressive mass media or a mass media that would make possible the empowerment of the most disadvantaged classes or of citizens who do not have access to power (in the different spheres of life) could be accurately defined as a «monster» and if the Internet is

characterized by something, it is the direct elimination of the possibility of otherness (the global medium is also the medium that symbolically homogenizes everything under its logic. There is no possible Other and even less room for the epitome of the Other, that is the Monster).

We do not tire of repeating it: the logic of the mass media, which are business structures, is the logic of capital, and that logic is obviously opposed to anything that can fundamentally destabilize the structures that support it. Thus, behind the seemingly destabilizing and para-democratic showcases of a decaffeinated simulacrum of Rhizome and Fragment, lurk the well-known totalizing and hierarchical structures. What is actually «new» is a new form of populism driven by the «interactive media» and its rhetoric.

We can offer an example in which we are able to clearly appreciate two essential dimensions, in terms of social control, typical of the mass media (it must be taken into account that it is precisely this function of control and social homeostasis, undertaken essentially through the management of leisure time by means of «entertainment» products, by controlling the mainstream re-presentations, one of the main political functions of mass media and, therefore, of the Internet as such): we refer to the audiovisual serial production that practically monopolizes (especially among young people) leisure time dedicated to cultural consumption.

It is interesting at this point to allude to the highly structured, predictable and precisely anti-rhizomatic dimension of the serial production of mainstream platforms that almost completely monopolize the available leisure time. Under the appearance of an infinite variety, we find a highly homogenous discursive structure, which is responsible for producing this effect of déjà vu behind the apparent diversity of subjects and plots. The values and the morals of series as diverse as *Chernobyl* (HBO, 2019), based on the Chernobyl nuclear accident) and *The Terror* (AMC, 2018), based on the lost Franklin expedition), just to give two examples, are very similar. Both are declared to be based, closely or loose-

ly, on historical events («based on true events»⁵) while declaring themselves fictions, and the underlying message is: there are only depoliticized individuals against terror. Politics, according to these discourses, means the destruction of individuality, and is, by definition, unethical, and therefore, there is nothing that individuals can do to change anything, since they are just private fireworks, burning themselves out in a futile fight against the powers that be (whether it is the Soviet officers and politicians, or the imperial power). The message that underlies so many serial plots is then: politics equals violence, and terror and martyrdom are the only way left for «heroic» private individuals. The result is, obviously, a defense of conformism and the clear futility of opposing any current status quo. And all those moral prescriptions are said to be «based on true events». The seeming multiplicity of choices and discourses, when we dig a little deeper into the structure of those narratives and their subjacent values, reveals itself to be the opposite of a rhizome in every way. It is instead an arborescent structure, with a multiplicity of branches that have the same systemic roots. It also reflects a «factuality» and a conception of reality embodied into stereotyped and dogmatic fictional structure characterized by the denial of reality as a process and as a tensional structure open to uncertainty. The buzzed «uncertainty» omnipresent in mainstream media discourses is not the uncertainty that characterizes individual and civil freedom (political freedom), but the dissuasive interface used to persuade people that the forces that drive that system are completely out of their control. «We live in an age of uncertainty» is the motto of a *certain* establishment that conceals its logic behind the display of globalization. It is not the times that are uncertain, since the logic that governs them is clearly established, as always happens with the laws of capital. The «other» uncertainty that should be defended and preserved does not describe a state of facts, but rather designates a method: uncertain, then, becomes a verb: «to uncertain the world» means to confront the discursive fictional

⁵ Cfr. Carrera, Pilar. *Basado en hechos reales. Mitologías mediáticas e imaginario digital*. Madrid: Cátedra, 2020.

structures that conform it at a specific moment, including those behind the informative and documentary narratives that are also built upon fictional structures. The demeaning and negative connotations attributed to uncertainty consistently bypass or omit the role that uncertainty plays in terms of political (and therefore individual) freedom.

The situation created by COVID-19, in which physical confinement and restrictions on civil liberties were accompanied by the outburst and hyperactivity on digital media, is a good metaphor for this inextricable imbrication between the mass media Internet and a controlled simulacrum of intimacy and privacy. Actually, the Internet logic seems to perform at its best in situations of confinement and even restriction of civil liberties. This authoritarian side of the medium does not only derive from the opportunities for control that it offers to governments and corporations, but also from the communicational logic it has cultivated among individuals that rely on it to channel fears, feelings and hopes. The temptation to legitimize with a scientific rubric the logic of surveillance and control inherent to the Internet is great. This has been clearly stated during the COVID-19 pandemic with numerous scientific voices explicitly or implicitly suggesting that the best way to keep the pandemic under control is through systematic surveillance of the population and citizens digital devices. One of the consequences we can expect from the post-COVID era is the legitimization and massive acceptance of control through digital means in order to «save the skin» of this «You» that the early propaganda about the Internet proclaimed as «empowered»⁶. Another consequence will be the general mistrust of the «other» as a source of contamination, an other no longer considered only in racial or classist terms, but of the other in general, *any other*, the refusal and mistrust of the very physicality of the other turned into a life threat. There is no better basis than this interiorized mistrust for consolidating

⁶ The front page of Time Magazine of December 25, 2006 named «Person of the Year» the «You» of the average internet user declaring him «in control» of the Information Age: «In 2006, the World Wide Web became a tool for bringing together the small contributions of millions of people and making them matter». Retrieved from <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/europe/0,92,63,901061225,00.html>.

social control. The greater the loss of distance from the digital environment and the Internet as its most genuine representative, the more the distance from the real. The implications of this trend are enormous in socio-political terms.

Therefore, the representational spaces built upon the Internet rhetoric share some common features such as:

- 1) The chasm between the public and the private spheres. Most of the discursive production around the Internet is centered on a decontextualized and privatized user, omitting the cultural, political and economic factors upon which privacy is built and simulating an «insuperable» hiatus between privacy and politics. This decontextualized and «global» user is the one who is considered abstractly «empowered» by the Internet (only on the condition that the user remains an exclusively private enunciator).
- 2) The idea that «old corporations» and «old media» have lost control in the new digital environment in favor of new «independent» voices and influences flourishing in cyberspace is the perfect smokescreen to divert attention from the focus of control and influence by refocusing it on a kind of fluid environment (viscous, in fact) in which the proliferation of influential potentials would dilute the very notion of power.
- 3) According to the institutionalized Internet rhetoric, it is suggested that in a potential space of almost infinite possibilities (such has been the dominant picture of the Internet machinery), individuals would only be limited by their own creativity. The fallacy of the tabula rasa and the disintermediation myths are revealed to be quite useful for diverting attention from the structures of power that still administer and orchestrate the Internet «noise», which is not a form of anarchy but a simulacrum (a *mise en scene*) of the vanishing of corporate power. Mass media, Internet included, are highly structured and hierarchical devices. The «entropy effect», the «horizontality», the «desintermediation», etc., are just effects of meaning generated by a specific dominant rhetoric about the medium, a rhetoric that has been sustained and publicized not only by corporations, but also by academicians, intellectuals, journalists, etc.
- 4) At the same time that the dominant discourse on the Internet privileges in its particular *mise en scene* the private and anonymous individual, declaring him abstractly «empowered» by mere Internet access, there is a systematic and progressive undermining and discrediting of certain institutions, especially related to the public sector, which are accused of colliding with individuals' private initiative, of being made up of functionaries who enjoy a privileged situation and security in the face of the uncertainty that governs the rest of the population, etc. This systematic message of public opinion against the public sphere is perfect ground for creating a society in which the law of the toughest is the only one. The acceptance of this rhetoric on the part of the most vulnerable demonstrates the power of this mystification rhetoric fueled by the myth of the empowerment of the «common man» spread by the Internet.
- 5) Information, in the so-called «information society» is conceived as a mere repository of data, completely separated from any processual logic and totally isolated from the political notion of action. Beyond all the surrounding buzz on interactivity and feedback, lies an outright negation of action supported by notions such as the complexity of technologically driven societies, the overwhelming logic of globalization, etc. Once again, the private individual of the Internet is depicted as a depoliticized and innocuous character: John Berger's words seem appropriate to describe this Catch-22 situation and its «widespread, deliberate use of false ideological propaganda as a type of weapon. Such propaganda preserves within people outdated structures and ways of feeling and thinking, whilst forcing new experiences on them» (Berger, 153).
- 6) Behind all the buzz about the user's empowerment, the citizen-user is still represented in the dominant mass media rhetoric with condescendence and paternalism, an individual who is perpetually under age, and who is treated in a patronizing way.

- 7) There is no possible «information overload», since, by definition, information is overload. In the digital realm the role of mediated information is flooding everything, overflowing. Immoderate and excessive, information serves, in the first place, to prevent the very possibility of action, since information, if we consider it as a true basement for action, is always restricted, difficult to access, precise and scarce. The overloading of information that is systematically mentioned in relation to the Internet and the digital environment pertains to the first class: information used as a control device, based not upon classical forms of censure, but, instead upon a much more effective simulacrum of plurality and randomness.
- 8) The supreme commandment in this publicized allegedly hyper-private Internet abode is «never stop communicating». Obviously, the reason is, above all, business. The Internet business is based upon the phatic function, the continuous circulation of inputs, no matter the content. The «economy of the click» requires the interiorization on the part of the citizen of the necessity and the goodness of mediated communication. This assumption implies, of course, the punishments (well known, since they have been opportunely scenified by mass media) for not communicating, with ostracism and anomie being the most obvious forms of retaliation against the average citizen that refuses to adopt the digital media logic⁷.
- 9) In many ways, communication has become the new class divide, one of the main instruments for class segregation today. Those who are not part of the elite or do not have power, in the various manifestations in which power can be declined, must incessantly supply contents and feedback; they are the new informational proletarians, the workforce of the digital industry: supplying content, interacting, browsing... for free. They feed the business of the rulers, this is pure and raw economic logic. Those in power are exempt from the obligation of online interaction and mediated communication. They define, instead, the communication laws, the laws of the media, by which a society is governed and controlled and they manage to keep themselves out of the gigantic control and tracking mechanism that is the Internet. The media silence, the ability to control the media staging and *mise en scène* and the determination of the rules of media discourse, of its structure and its interdictions, are the main attributes of power. Silence, control of the media scenery, and the possession of *genuine* information (considered not as a smoke screen, but as (very scant information required for action and strategic decision making) are also attributes of power.
- 10) The «social housing» provided by the digital environment hides, behind an apparent democratization of the public media environment and behind a simulacrum of discursive transparency, plurality and horizontality, consisting in the creation of communicational ghettos and a «division of labor» focused on the provision of a labor force «for free» by the many (the so-called «interactive users») and on the use and profitability of the data they deliver while «surfing», searching and interacting by the few (those known, in what is claimed to be old Marxist jargon, as the dominant classes, specifically those who hold economic power). These new symbolic housing structures present, in this light, the same depressing and marginal face of the traditional «media suburbs» characteristic of the pre-Internet media system designed to be inhabited by the masses-audiences.
- 11) What kind of privacy and what conception of the individual is then promoted by this new media ecosystem? Far from the hyped empowered user, what we got is a phantasmagoria of empowerment that hides new forms of submission and control. This Internet private (person) is, actually, part of a massive army of informational under-proletariat meant to feed a system whose laws are completely out of their control and whose profits don't revert in any way to them. Users inhabit a hyperconnected

⁷ Not answering WhatsApp messages or not interacting with a peer group on the Internet has, as is obvious, its consequences.

world which means, on one hand, systematic control, and on the other hand, the definitive and most accomplished conversion of the so-called leisure time into industrial time (the Internet overwork, the consumption and use of the medium «out of the office», are a main part of the digital business consummated in what was traditionally considered «nonproductive time»). The house, *home*, the quintessential private space, has been transformed into a digital factory in which ultimately helpless private individuals in a hyperconnected space labor night and day *for free* (and also bear the costs of Internet access and various subscriptions). Nearly the perfect business.

12) The digital house («the smart house») is becoming a space of control and tracking in which progressively familiar objects, seemingly innocent, became unapparent spies and informants («intelligent houses») and «smart cities» are essentially declinations of the secularly announced informational Big Brother whose time seems to have come, finally, metamorphosed into unexpected non-heroic and familiar forms.). They are inhabited by «users», a term which, in principle, is rhetorically placed at the antipodes of the «masses», a designation of the reception field provided by the «unidirectional» and analogical media, which are usually opposed to the interactive and digital media (Internet). Nevertheless, what does «user» mean? User has been associated with the notions of action, creation and participation by what is known as the public or audiences. This supposed change of status with respect to the alienated masses, brought about by a medium (Internet) that in advertising jargon (and, more surprisingly, in self-designated theoretical discourses) is presented as an emancipatory medium, which would have given back to the spectatorial people (audiences) their rights and, in the first place, their right to the public word, does not take into account that the place of enunciation is not the place of discursive production, but of the determination of the rules governing the discourse. It is evident that those rules are

not decided by the users, that the only thing they can do is to assume a discursive logic, a hardware and a software that formats their discourse and to whose productive logic they are foreign.

13) If we go back to the etymology of the term things seem to be much clearer. «User», according to the Collins Dictionary is «a person or thing that uses something such as a place, facility, product or machine». In this definition all the interactive, emancipatory and creative glamour that the Internet user has been dressed in is deeply nuanced. The «something» that the user uses falls essentially outside its control, as well as the structure and the rules that determine this «something». The individualization of the undefined and gregarious «masses» through «individual» users, means nothing in terms of emancipation of the political subject behind the enunciative place reserved for the Internet user. This discursive instance (the user) is allowed to participate in a debate and foster a communicative logic that falls completely outside his reach. He doesn't rule the business and he is not even allowed to become a shareholder. What interests us here is the place of reception graciously granted by the owners of those means of productions to the working masses known as users. It is important to consider the concept in rhetorical terms, not in personal or individual terms; the user is, essentially, a discursive place that determines a specific mode of reception. It is a normative concept, not a descriptive or even less so, an objective one.

14) Reduced to a «user», the citizen can find little space to display his freedom as such. To begin with, regardless of the originality of the contents he generates on the Internet, he will never surpass the status of user (the capacity for domestication of the mere concept is enormous) and he must be aware that at any moment he can be denied its use. The Internet is, in fact, a private club in which very few members reserve the right of admission. The right to «customize» conceded to the user expresses clearly that the model upon which variations and customiza-

tions are allowed is granted by non-users. In short, the digital home in which users live as tenants is paid for doubly: with bills and with information (data) constantly provided through interactivity and that presupposes explicit and contractual acceptance of systematic monitoring and control by the owner of the services provided and used by users. Under this denomination the only individuality granted to this «global» informational user is that which leaves the individual out in the cold in political terms, on her own in a situation characterized by a complete lack of equipollence, i.e. the battered individuality of the outcast. We can consider the user, as a political category, much closer to the outcast or the immigrant whose political rights are not recognized than to the citizen allowed to explore (which means, to determine through enunciative acts) potential spaces of discursive freedom that obviously no subject can achieve being typified as a user. The potential relationship to the medium is determined by the enunciative place of «user», the rhetoric equivalent, under the rules of the digital economy, of the under-proletariat or the servant. User is the one who consumes and who is consumed (whose time is consumed by mass mediated communicational operations of a diverse order).

15) Just to put a recent and dramatic example, the confinement caused by COVID-19 led to an unprecedented restriction of public freedoms in countries with a long democratic tradition, combined with the generalization of legitimate and imperious digital surveillance undertaken in the name of the «public interest» especially through smartphones. It is the perfect example of an encapsulated and strictly media- controlled privacy accompanied by a massive, extensive and frenetic use of the Internet as the only window «open to the outside world» and the only means of contact as vicarious as it is frustrating with the other. The COVID-19 crisis has permitted the foreshadowing of the true dimension of the Internet in terms of control and social engineering, following decades of adaptation, interior-

ization and massive adoption of the medium by the citizenry. In this perfect storm in which two viral natures collided (that of the internet and that of COVID-19), the structural links between the Internet and socio-political isolation have become clear.

16) The COVID-19 crisis has made it possible to clearly visualize the structural link between the Internet and social control. Situations of restriction of civil liberties and confinement in democratic countries like those that occurred during this health crisis went hand in hand with the blossoming and healthfulness of the digital system. We are no longer faced with the old and often reactionary dilemma between the direct and the mediated or recorded, the physical and the vicarious, the «raw» and the «cooked», to borrow from the concepts of Levi-Strauss. What is new is that virtual space has clearly revealed itself to us as the place of a hyper-staged and fabricated «raw», of the rejection of all protocol and ceremony, of all erotic «dépense» in a Batailleian sense (the impossibility of mourning over the dead, is a clear and extreme example, but many more could be cited). Only the phantasmagoria of a real-time stock market is left. This is a new kind of hyper-coded barbarism, data-driven, contactless, that has little to do with the old, eminently physical, industrialized battleground. The naturalization in the Internet realm of political factors that are confused with an objective and unquestionable given reality («the unthought categories of thought that delimit the thinkable and predetermine thinking» (Bourdieu, 1982: 10), is related to the prevailing rhetoric of intimacy and privacy linked to the medium.

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